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May 4, 2022

Hon. Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

I write to you on behalf of Palestinian attorney and human rights defender Sahar Francis to highlight a recent travel denial incident at Israel's Ben Gurion Airport and to seek clarification on the reason Ms. Francis was denied travel through the United States.

On Saturday, April 30, 2022, Ms. Francis arrived at Israel's Ben Gurion Airport to travel to Mexico City to attend and participate in the 2022 World Social Forum. Despite holding an Israeli passport with a U.S. visa valid through April 2023, she was prohibited from checking in to American Airlines flight AA 053, the first leg of a flight to Mexico City that transited through Miami, Florida.<sup>1</sup> Having already passed through the first Israeli security check without incident, at the flight check-in counter, Ms. Francis was informed that she would not be allowed through U.S. Customs and Border Protection screening upon arrival at Miami International Airport and, thus, would not be allowed to check in or board the flight. The American Airlines representative advised her to consult the United States Embassy for more information.

Ms. Francis is a greatly respected Palestinian attorney and human rights defender, and is the General Director of the Ramallah-based Palestinian human rights organization, Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association. Addameer, which advocates on behalf of Palestinian political prisoners and administrative detainees is one of the six prominent Palestinian human rights organizations declared "terrorist organizations" by the Israeli Minister of Defense Benny Gantz over six months ago.<sup>2</sup>

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called the move to criminalize the six prominent Palestinian civil society organizations "appalling and unjust" and "an alarming escalation that threatens to shut down the work of Palestine's most prominent civil society organizations," and linked Israel's emboldened authoritarian actions to decades of inadequate

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Francis has previously traveled to the United States on this visa without incident, most recently in 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The six Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations are Addameer, Al-Haq, Defense for Children International – Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, the Bisan Center for Research and Development, and the Union of Palestinian Women Committees.

**JUSTICE TAKES A FIGHT.**

responses by the international community to grave Israeli human rights abuses.<sup>3</sup> More than 300 U.S.-based social justice, civil rights, and human rights leaders and organizations, including ours, sent you a letter on October 29, 2021, demanding that you immediately and unequivocally condemn the Israeli government's decision to criminalize these Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations.<sup>4</sup>

In February, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, reaffirmed that the organizations “have worked for decades to promote human rights and provide critical humanitarian assistance in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and are key partners of the United Nations.”<sup>5</sup> Bachelet declared that “[t]he designation decisions were based on vague and unsubstantiated reasons” and “OHCHR was not aware of any credible evidence to support these accusations.”<sup>6</sup>

Last month, the American Bar Association, the world's largest voluntary association of attorneys and legal professionals, sent a letter to Israeli officials raising concerns that Israeli authorities have failed to guarantee the six Palestinian civil society organizations' procedural rights under international law.<sup>7</sup>

Israel's actions concerning the six Palestinian civil society organizations should be understood in their broader context: Over the past several years, Israeli, Palestinian, and international human rights and humanitarian organizations have faced an increasingly difficult operating environment and shrinking civic space in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, *i.e.*, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, that negatively impacts their ability to deliver assistance and advocate on behalf of Palestinian human rights.

Delegitimization and disinformation campaigns have been advanced by an international network of extremist groups that, in cooperation with Israeli government ministries, aim to silence and eliminate lawful human rights work that exposes widespread human rights violations inherent in Israel's military occupation of Palestinians and ongoing expansion of settlements in violation of international law.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, *Israel/Palestine: Designation of Palestinian Rights Groups as Terrorists*, Oct. 22, 2021,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/22/israel/palestine-designation-palestinian-rights-groups-terrorists>

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Secretary Blinken from U.S. Organizations & Leaders in Solidarity with Palestinian Civil Society: 304 Organizations Demand Biden Administration Condemn Israel's Crackdown on Human Rights Groups, Oct. 29, 2021, <https://ccrjustice.org/letter-secretary-blinken-us-orgs-leaders-solidarity-palestinian-civil-society>.

<sup>5</sup> Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the United Nations Human Rights Council, *Human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and the obligation to ensure accountability and justice*, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/49/25, ¶ 36, Feb. 23, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/264/44/pdf/G2226444.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> American Bar Association, *Letter Regarding Israel's Designation of Six Palestinian Human Rights and Humanitarian Organizations as Terrorist Entities*, Apr. 22, 2022, [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/government\\_affairs\\_office/rol-letter-to-israeli-pm-on-designation-of-palestinian-orgs-as-terrorist.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/government_affairs_office/rol-letter-to-israeli-pm-on-designation-of-palestinian-orgs-as-terrorist.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Amal Jamal, *The Rise of “Bad Civil Society” in Israel: Nationalist Civil Society Organizations and the Politics of Delegitimization*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (2018), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2018C02\\_jamal.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2018C02_jamal.pdf).

While Biden administration officials have repeatedly stated the administration strongly believes respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and a strong civil society are critically important to responsible and responsive governance, the administration itself has contributed to the shrinking of civic space by allowing the allegations to fester without taking a policy position concerning the Israeli designations. Six months on, State Department officials have an apparent policy of not communicating or engaging with the six Palestinian organizations, and State Department spokesperson Ned Price continues to repeat that administration officials are reviewing the information provided by Israeli authorities.

In this context, Ms. Francis' recent travel denial incident, without explanation, is understood as the latest escalation in a campaign to silence and eliminate legitimate and lawful human rights work by Palestinian civil society. **It now appears that the Biden administration is acting on the Israeli government designations by denying Ms. Francis transit through the United States to Mexico City despite her holding an Israeli passport with a U.S. visa valid through April 2023.**

I request that you provide clarifications regarding Ms. Francis' recent travel denial apparently due to unknown U.S. government action and to confirm whether it is now the policy of the U.S. government to deny senior leadership of Addameer from entering the United States?

I further ask that you reverse any such decision, should it have been taken, or correct any administrative measures that may have led to Ms. Francis' denial of travel to or through the United States, and confirm she is permitted to enter the United States in accord with her valid visa.

Sincerely,



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Executive Director

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CC: Mr. Hady Amr, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Israeli and Palestinian Affairs,  
Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs

Ms. Beth Van Schaack, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice, Office of Global  
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